

“The Map is Not the Territory – The Word is Not the Thing”¹: Exploring the Use of Language in the Art of Rolfing®

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The following is an edited transcript of a lecture I gave in (2008) on the use of language in Rolfing sessions. © December 2013²

Part 1.

“The map is not the territory.” Dr. Alfred Korzybski’s famous words were quoted frequently during early trainings at the Rolf Institute beginning in 1981. Korzybski was a Polish-American philosopher and scientist. Dr. Rolf respected his original theories and felt they were directly applicable to the study and embodiment of Rolfing. In an attempt to trace the threads of Dr. Rolf’s early influences, I attended a 10-day seminar studying the work of Alfred Korzybski in 1997.

Korzybski developed the field called **general semantics**. In 1933 he published **Science and Sanity**, a treatise on this study. This book is nothing less than a canonical masterpiece. At the height of the quantum revolution in physics, Korzybski integrated quantum understandings with the burgeoning research in human neuro-science and language. He maintained that human beings are limited in what they know by (1) the structure of their nervous systems, and (2) their use of language. He emphasized that human beings do not experience the world directly, but only through their “abstractions” (nonverbal impressions or “gleanings” derived from the nervous system, and verbal indicators expressed and derived from language). Sometimes our perceptions and the language we use to describe our perceptions actually end in creating false conclusions. He emphasized that our understanding of what is happening often lacks a **similarity of structure** with what is “actually” happening.³ I recall early Rolfing instructors giving examples of the ‘lack of similarity’ in our descriptions as we were learning to assess and describe the structural patterns of the individual standing before us. We were instructed to use language devoid of personal projections, interpretations or emotion. This was not always an easy task as we slowly learned to describe the territory we were ‘assessing’ prior to our flowering visual and mental constructs. However, there is more to the phrase, **“the map is not the territory”**, than was often quoted. The rest of the phrase reads: **“the word is not the thing”**(it represents).

“The words are maps, and the map is not the territory. The map is static; the

¹ Alfred Korzybski. Quote written in Rolfing notes. 1981.

² This class was co-taught with Rebecca Carli, assisted by Hiroyoshi Tahata and Kevin Mccoy.

³ Wikipedia. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Korzybski.

territory constantly flows. Words are always about the past or the unborn future, never about the living present. The present is ever too quick for them; by the time words are out, it is gone.”⁴

Delving into the roots of this phrase sweeps the reader into a cursory exploration of Korzybski’s theory of General Semantics that was quite amazing for the time in which it was written. “The map is not the territory ... the word is not the thing (it represents).” This is my very simplified interpretation gleaned from his writings.

Through illustration Korzybski depicts a visual representation of how the brain and nervous abstracts (**omits and/or automatically selects out**) the cascade of energies bombarding us at every moment. This barrage is literally beneath our conscious awareness. He called his diagram the **structural differential**. (see diagram 1) Just as an example, imagine eating a sandwich, the digestive system secretes enzymes to digest the sandwich selecting what is nutritious and eliminating what you do not need. This activity is totally instinctive, reflexive, without volition. The brain and nervous system does this automatically.

The **structural differential** summarizes the essence of Korzybski’s work. Another way to understand this process is to imagine a kitchen colander –the kind you strain pasta in. Now imagine that the universe – with its vast fields of vibrating subatomic particles (photons) pouring through the holes of your colander. Korzybski called this initial step of his structural differential diagram **the event or ‘process level’**. He also spoke of the shape being a parabola – or in mundane terms, a colander. Now in your imagination, attach a string to each of the particles that make their way through the openings. Now, there might be numerous strings hanging through the holes of your colander. A human nervous system, through its varying sense organs cannot perceive individual subatomic energies, (represented by the hanging strings). It takes an enormous amount of these energies to make up something substantial enough to be seen, felt, smelled etc.⁵

From this **‘process level’** with its zillions of quantum energies filtering through we come to a **‘sense level’**. Hanging from the process level (beneath the colander-parabola and its strings) is a disc. This sense level disc reveals the photon energies that are now being perceived through the nervous system. The other photon energies have been omitted (or abstracted out). Depending on our unique neurological patterns, gravity preferences and sensory filtering systems, the vibrating photon particles streaming through are filtered according to personal biases and histories. Korzybski put it this way: *“we are immersed in a world full of energy manifestations, out of which we abstract directly only a very small portion, these abstractions being already colored by the specific functioning and structure of*

⁴ Weinberg, Harry L. **Levels of Knowing and Existence**. Institute of General Semantics. 2nd edition. 1973. Baltimore, MD. Pg. 35.

⁵ Sawin, Gregory. **The Structural Differential**. 1985. Un-published manuscript. Pg.9.

the nervous system."⁶

A 'sensation' results from a nervous system responding to and filtering (abstracting) out billions and billions of subatomic energies that are literally assailing us every mini-moment. All of this is happening on a non-verbal level, beneath our consciousness, and not yet the level of words, ideas or statements.⁷

Korzybski's celebrated phrases as well as the structural differential became the ground for a lecture given in a Unit 2 (Embodiment of Rolfing training) in 2008 on the use of language in Rolfing sessions. His work seems to have a direct influence on the words we choose and the way they may impact our clients and ourselves. The key to remember is that words are abstractions of reality. Korzybski called this the **descriptive level**. He emphasized that words can only represent a fraction of an individual's experience of their reality but are limited as to what they convey and can often entangle a person in their story or beliefs because of the words that are used. Succinctly stated, Korzybski understood "the word is not the thing (it represents)."

Return to the phrase: "the map is not the territory – the word is not the thing." This phrase identifies the difference between the non-verbal process level of reality – the quantum energies pouring into the colander - the territory, and the map – which for us is anatomy. **'The territory' represents the constant movement of extremely small subatomic 'energies.** And it is **this** movement that underlies everything. **The body is movement.** Dr. Rolf said the body is 'plastic'. It is pliable, changeable and ripe for structural change. The breathing matrix of fascia is the territory. It is not confined to the map of anatomy.

Korzybski said this about the quantum level of reality: "*If we take something, anything let us say the object called a pencil, and inquire what it represents, according to science 1933, we find that the scientific object represents a mad dance of 'electrons', which is different every instant, which never repeats itself, which is known to consist of extremely complex dynamic processes of very fine structure, acting upon by, and reacting upon the rest of the universe, inextricably connected with everything else ...*"⁸

Our sensing bodies do not end at our skin boundary but perceive and metabolize beyond our skin. We are embedded in our environment. Our surroundings touch us as we touch our world. Rolfing transforms the density of tissues enabling an individual's system to become more fluid, flexible and responsive. There is a mutual inter-penetration with surroundings. We engage a system that is intelligent, pliable, and expressive of life moving through its tissues.

⁶ Korzybski, Alfred. **Science and Sanity**. 4th edition, distributed by The Institute of General Semantics 1958 Baltimore, MD. pg. 238.

⁷ Sawin, Gregory. **The Structural Differential**. 1985. Un-published manuscript. Pg. 17.

⁸ Korzybski, Alfred. **Science and Sanity**. 4th edition, distributed by The Institute of General Semantics 1958 Baltimore, MD. Pg. 387.

Refer again to diagram.1. Notice the disc hanging from the process level that the parabola-colander symbolizes. The disc represents the sense level. What a person 'sees' is based on their interpretation of the light patterns that were perceived split seconds ago. When we imagine that we are responding to what is happening in reality we are actually responding to an interpretation of the energies abstracted due to our own neurological biases. To live is to abstract; everything we do involves a level of abstraction.⁹

Additional strings hanging from the small openings in the disc represent the sense level. We abstract or filter out sensations and the meaning we assign to them according to beliefs, memories, stories etc. Hanging from this disc, are placards illustrating a variety of events in time and which represent the descriptive (word) level of an individual's map. This descriptive level is keyed to earlier similar events in someone's life. We continually abstract from the level of process, the streaming sensations pouring through. Our interpretations of these sensations mirror our history and link us to a chain of earlier, similar events. When an individual expresses themselves via the descriptive level through words, phrases, stories etc. we move further and further away from the quantum event which is closest to 'reality' and the truth which lies beneath our sensation. Realize that the 'story' a client (or the story we tell ourselves) is an abstraction from the quantum event and sensation level. The words chosen may actually limit them (or us) to a particular belief system (map) about history, body, etc. but it is not the territory. Abstraction like digestion is a natural bodily function. Korzybski encouraged his students to cultivate an awareness of the abstraction process and realize the level we are speaking from.

Part 2:

Applying Korzybski's axiom to Rolfing®: understanding its application to Rolfing and our use of language in a session.

You may be gleaning the value Dr. Rolf placed on Korzybski's work as she taught her early students to 'see' and 'assess' an individual's structure coupled with her admonition to avoid projecting personal stories, ideas, beliefs, or feeling states onto their client. From conversations I've enjoyed with the first wave of practitioners, I was told that she emphasized describing what was there, and not what was imagined as an emotional component or a fantasy. For example, a twist in the upper thorax that lifted one shoulder higher was probably not an expression of a 'angry' ribs. Practitioners were asked to "see" the truth (the process level → sensory level) not an imagined history. They were asked to "see" alignment unfolding through the fascial work of Rolfing® and not as a re-interpretation of a story.

As we observe structure you might see a right shoulder that sits higher than their left shoulder or a right innominate bone that does not shift anteriorly with push off etc. It is easy to forget that an individual's structure when standing is a static

⁹ Sawin, Gregory. **The Structural Differential**. 1985. Un-published manuscript. Pg. 13.

expression of the reality of movement at every level. A client may begin to express their structural patterns in words that actually limit their availability to shift that pattern or the practitioner may describe their structure with words that limit openness to transformative effect. The word-map we use to describe structural patterns or movement behaviors may actually lock these patterns into their tissues. At the **verbal level, 'the map'** consisting of words, descriptions, beliefs, theories etc. often limits and binds the territory. "The word is not the thing." For example, over these many years of Rolfing, clients will report, "this is my dead leg", or "this is my dumb foot, or "I can't stand up straight" etc. etc. ... They have related "my Rolfer says this is my bad leg." Although the Rolfing series may have been many years earlier – these words 'stick' like glue and actually serve to solidify their body map. The words that are used to describe something are descriptions and therefore by definition are abstracted representations that can both limit and inhibit the ability to shift structural patterns.

Here is an example from my practice that has to do with the labeling of a sensation and the restrictions that ensue. I was working with a young woman in a first hour session. She stated that she was beginning to feel a familiar sensation in her chest. Almost instantly, she labeled this movement as 'fear'. I watched her chest contract and breathing stop. She reported, "It's fear. I'm feeling fear." I rested my hand gently on her sternum realizing she had just jumped from the sensation level, sensing energy moving, to labeling this sensation as fear. Immediately, she launched into the story about her fear and hurriedly related a chain of associations from her history. In seconds, we had moved away from the quantum (the parabola-colander) and sensation level (the disc) into further abstraction. I asked her to allow a breath and gently made eye contact with her while suggesting she sense her back settling into the support of the table. After she relaxed a little more, I asked her to describe the sensation she was experiencing. She said it was like something bubbling up inside her chest and that this sensation was familiar. She knew this feeling as fear with all its corresponding physical responses; stopping her breath, contracting her chest, tightening her calves, etc. This was also the pattern I observed in her body stance. The bubbling sensation had moved in milli-seconds from the level of neutral sensation - to the descriptive level and labeling of a feeling state carrying her further and further from the quantum process level and down the levels of the structural differential – her history.

I listened to her story, one that had been told times before, and said: "I'm curious, what might happen if you allow your focus to be with the sensation of bubbling and lifted the label of fear off that sensation." I suggested that labeling a sensation was like putting a strip of Velcro over it and that she could peel the Velcro away. I repeated this suggestion again and suggested that just for a moment she experience the *sensation of bubbling*. She agreed and responded with, "wow, this feels like excitement". However, it should be noted that even "excitement" is a label. Without labeling, sensation is sensation is sensation. It is not about replacing a "bad" label with a "good" label. Without abstraction, sensation is sensation is sensation and is neither good nor bad. It is life moving through.

Perhaps the 'bubbling-up' that this person was experiencing now offered a novel interpretation for her. Moving from a label of fear to sensing the bubbling as sensation, there is renewed possibility to shift her structural set. This approach bridges Korzybski's general semantics with the *psycho-biological* taxonomy of Rolfing. The language we use to describe and label belief systems, feeling states and story influences structural patterns and movement behaviors. Supporting a client in staying with the neutrality of a sensation (as energy moving through the body), without labeling – (even the more positive label of 'excitement' – is still a label), can begin to tease apart the threads holding together historical and patterned familiarity.

The map is not the territory, the word is not the thing. Oftentimes, the anatomical map and goals of a session need to be momentarily set aside when the patterned binding of the fascia appears to be limited by language and beliefs. In fact, the goals of a session may not be achieved unless the belief system begins to be addressed.

For example: in working with the CEO of a prominent company he complained of chronic tightness in his neck. His shoulder girdle appeared to be held up by his ears. We worked to open adaptability in his legs and pelvis as support for his upper body. However, he continued to move as if his shoulders carried him. It was during 3rd hour back work, when he began to feel his shoulders relaxing and sense the support coming from his pelvis. After a moment of settling into this novel sensory experience he exclaimed, "if I don't keep my shoulders tight, I won't work hard." He confirmed a long held belief, "Keep tight to keep going." Here the challenge becomes to untangle the sensation of relaxing shoulders from the long held belief that allowing ease meant being idle, sloth-like, and unproductive. We worked with the sensation of weight in the bones of his arms, sensing a space for breath in his axilla as well as the movement of his scapula when raising his arms. New movement behaviors needed to extended into his daily life: when driving his car, motorcycle, working at his computer, or addressing employees with company policy and profits.

Another side of cultivating the language of sensation with our clients is attuning to our inner sensation as practitioners. The question becomes: what am I sensing? What happens in my own system as I come into relationship with living, breathing, moving tissue? How might I cultivate mind-full attention to my own personal interoceptive state throughout a session? Where do I fall into the trap of labeling sensations instead of experiencing sensation without a label? How often do I forget the body is movement? The anatomical map is a great resource but often stifles a practitioner's understanding of the integral connectivity of the fascial matrix as we open to a whole body feeling of the living breathing territory beneath our hands.

Sensation is the language of the brain stem. Attending to sensation, without labeling, cultivates presence and a three-dimensional sense of inhabiting our 'body'. Korzybski said the natural tendency is to abstract: the quantum or process level -
→sensation → descriptive feeling states → story → history or earlier similar associations. Beneath every descriptive state is a sensation that is closest to the

quantum level of process with zillions of photons pulsing through the field. Attuning to the sensation moving through our bodies is one key to a deep experience of our aliveness. It is also a key to the cultivation of self-knowledge. Whether we are sensing warmth or grounding to earth, or breathing the clean air at the seaside or in the forest; our internal sense (interoception) is key to practitioner presence.

Interoception is the ability to read and interpret sensations arising from your own body. “The more viscerally aware you are – the more emotionally attuned you are.”¹⁰ The tendency to abstract and label sensation is naturally part of everyday behaviors, the practice is to notice that’s what we’re doing.

Speaking through images.

This morning (in the Principles class '08)¹¹ we explored yielding into the support of the floor, or the table or the supporting back of the chair. The question rose: how to describe these sensations. What’s your experience right now as you’re listening? Remembering that the word is not the thing ... yet we need language, words to communicate our ideas. One of you mentioned the word ‘curious’ as a description of your sensory state. I would ask you to notice the feeling sense beneath the word. What are the body sensations this word evokes within you? Or take the word ‘calm’. Notice the sensation beneath the word. What happens when you take the label off the word and just experience the neutral flow of energy-movement through your body? Like the bubbles in soda water – they’re just fizzy. Yesterday, Peter said “calm” was for him a sensation of feeling support. I would ask, “what is this feeling state of calm through your body?” It may be the sensation of settling, like a small stone slowly dropping into a pond or a sense of softening – widening vision. Remember that in our culture the language of sensation is often limited to ‘I’m in pain’ or ‘I’m out of pain’. In our sessions its important to help a cultivate a language for sensation. If a client speaks of pain: is it sharp, dull, all over, throbbing, cold, hot poker-like, intense pressure, squeezing, taking breath away, stabbing etc. The language of sensation is the language of the brainstem. Research now tells us that if I want to shift posture you can’t talk to the cortical brain. You cannot tell someone to just relax. It does not work. You have to speak to sensation to their brain stem. You have to use right brain language to begin to touch that dimension within a person. So what is right brain language? It is language that speaks with imagery, to the perception of weight and space and which through the voice tone of the practitioner is allowing and welcoming – it is not a ‘command’. For example: “stand up straight”, is a command that every client has heard over a lifetime. Instead, use the poetry of images and spaciousness. The right brain understands spaciousness. The body heals when given space. The right brain knows images. It is amazing what has stayed with me over these many years when the practitioner spoke with language that evoked spaciousness, allowing and imagery. Long ago, an ‘old-time’ Rolfer was

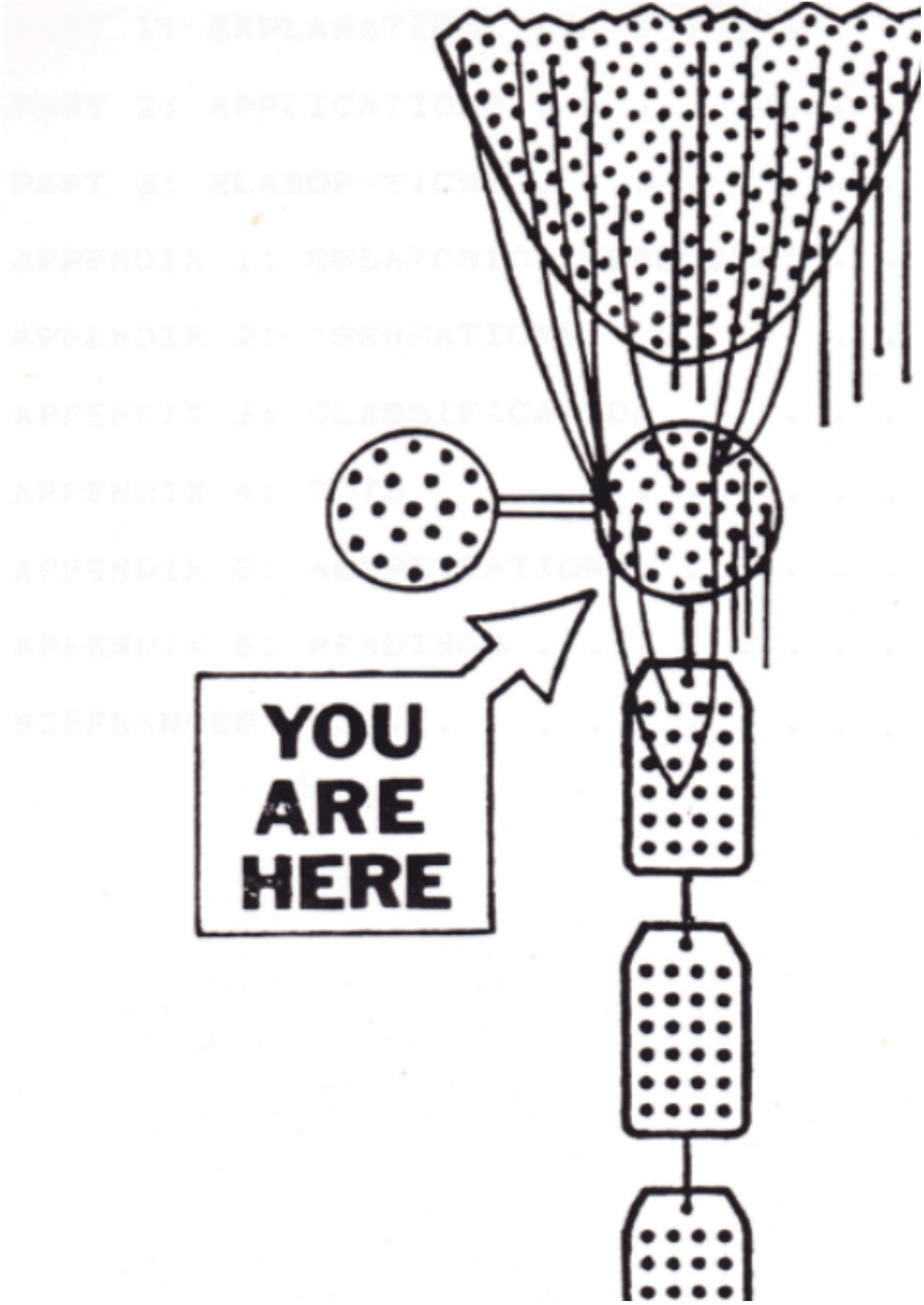
¹⁰ Blakeslee. Sandra & Matthew. **The Body Has a Mind of Its Own**. Random_House Publishing, New York. 2007. Pg. 180.

¹¹ This class combined 2 basic classes. Instructors present included Rebecca Carli, Hiroyoshi Tahata, Kevin McCoy and myself.

holding my cranium at my occiput and suggested the image. “ Let this bone widen as if curtains are opening and the sun is shining in.” Suddenly, my occiput dropped and widened. If he had told me in a commanding tone to “widen this bone”, my occiput would not have budged. Find your elusive poet who often hides out in your right brain. Of course, there are those individuals who need more literal words and anatomical pictures. As practitioners, we meet the client where they live.

Rosemary Feitis, DO, a pioneer Rolfer, who edited Dr. Rolf’s book: **Rolfing and Physical Reality** said, “what you feel, you will keep.” When attention is given to sensation, our clients leave with a tissue memory of that possibility; being upright and moving easily within their own skin. A picture is worth a thousand words, but a sensation is worth a thousand pictures.

Our role in Rolfing is not as therapist but as educator. The latin root of educate is ‘educare’ meaning to bring out. Our work includes the cultivation of language skills that invite, or that help decipher the invisible bindings a word or belief can have on a client’s structure and movement behaviors. The manner with which we cultivate our own use of language, invites and expresses a curiosity which may ignite curiosity in our clients, their own body sense and self-knowledge. In our culture, the body is often treated as a machine, parts are removed, replaced and war is declared on disease. Our bodies are living, breathing, sensing intelligence. In Rolfing we address an individual’s structure and movement behaviors with a goal of ease in movement , lessening pain and supporting their embodied alignment in the field of gravity. I love Rolfing because I can be totally quiet. Often in the depth of quiet within a session, a dynamic stillness is the reverberating sound, the language, the field and the space of my office becomes the temple of another’s transformation. At other times, in the language of laughter or tears or explanation somatic understanding transpires. The words we choose to evoke, explore, touch and educate can ease and smooth the unfolding of life’s vital movement through another’s body. And I continue to recall Korzybski’s axiom: “***the map is not the territory, the word is not the thing.***”



¹² **Diagram 1 of Korzybski's Structural Differential.** (from cover of Greg Sawin's unpublished manuscript . 1985.

- The **top parabola – colander depicts the Process or Event level:** the flow of quantum energies pouring through the universe all of which happens beneath our conscious awareness.
- The **disc represents the Sensory Level:** There is stillness and silence on the sensing level. *Words can sometimes blur vision, dull senses. Things are not what I say, think or believe they are. Others are not sensing what I am sensing.*¹³
- As we move to the tags we enter the Descriptive Level where labels occur.
- There is a vast difference between words and what they refer to. The word is not the thing process it represents, any more than a map (or words, beliefs, understandings, theories, opinions, expectations, hopes, wishes, etc.) **is not** the territory it maps. Others may describe (or “map”) the situation quite differently than you. They are not ‘seeing’ exactly what you are ‘seeing’, from your unique perspective.¹⁴

¹² Korzybski's Structural Differential. A diagram of levels of being.

¹³ From Milton Dawes interpretation of The Structural Differential.

- [Milton Dawes/structural differential.com](http://MiltonDawes/structural-differential.com)

¹⁴ Ibid. Dawes.